DAWN

OPINION

National disparities

THE Population Council's *District Vulnerability Index for Pakistan* offers a data-driven picture of vulnerabilities both at the provincial and district level. It shows that the nation's regional disparities are not accidental but an outcome of decades of skewed development policies and political priorities. The index collates existing datasets to measure and compare relative vulnerability across Pakistan's districts. Unlike traditional climate or disaster assessments, it focuses on underlying structural and systemic factors. It draws on 21 indicators grouped in six key domains to assess access to essential resources and opportunities: housing; communication and transportation; livelihoods; access to health services; access to public education; and demographics.

It is an uncomfortable truth: provincial disparities are not only wide; they are also structural and deepening. This is most visible in Balochistan, which continues to exist on the socioeconomic margins despite decades of policy rhetoric. The province scores at the bottom across nearly all domains — from infrastructure and communications to livelihoods and human development — reflecting systemic governance failures. The distribution of vulnerability — high unemployment, inadequate housing, poor access to health and education, etc — across the province paints a picture of exclusion from the national development strategy. Of the 10m people living in the 20 most vulnerable districts, more than half are in Balochistan. Conversely, the 20 least vulnerable districts are in Punjab — which has its own large islands of underdevelopment in the south and west — and a handful in Sindh and KP. This underscores how unevenly development gains have been disbursed. That 17 of the 20 most vulnerable districts are located in Balochistan suggests that vulnerability here is not the outcome of episodic shocks or disasters but of persistent neglect. Even KP, with its own challenges, fares far better than Balochistan, with only one district ranking among the five worst-performing districts.

Beyond statistics, this index is an indictment of successive governments that have consistently channelled resources and public investments into politically important regions. This deliberate choice, driven primarily by a highly centralised power and governance structure, and short-term electoral cycles, has starved remote and underdeveloped districts of essential services, ranging from basic healthcare and education to critical climate resilience measures necessary for even and equitable progress. In short, the *DVIP* report underpins two key points about our development landscape. First, the country's challenges stem not only from limited resources but, more critically, from deep inequalities in how those resources and essential services are distributed across regions and communities. Second, these entrenched vulnerabilities mean that those already left behind are both more exposed to disasters and far less likely to catch up with the better-developed areas.

Accords' expansion

SAUDI Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman received a rousing reception during his recent US visit, with President Donald Trump pulling out all the stops for his royal guest. The visit, marked by pageantry and frequent displays of mutual admiration, reaffirms the nearly nine-decade-old relationship between the kingdom and the US. There was talk of investment, while the US president declared that the kingdom was now a major non-Nato ally. This may have fallen short of the crown prince's expectations, who wanted stronger defence commitments, and the designation is likely a consolation prize. When the issue of the so-called Abraham Accords, and the associated recognition of Israel — Mr Trump has long tried to sell the idea to the Saudis — came up, the prince answered diplomatically. "We want to be part" of the accords, "but", he added, there needs to be "a clear path [to the] two-state solution".

If Saudi Arabia were to join the accords, and recognise Israel, it would open the pathway for the Zionist state's normalisation with most of the Muslim world, considering that the kingdom hosts Islam's holiest cities. Yet Mohammed Bin Salman surely realises that embracing Israel just after it has paused the Gaza genocide, and while the Zionist regime refuses to accept even the possibility of a Palestinian state, may not go down well with his own people and the Muslim/Arab street. Israel is in no mood to consider a Palestinian state, and talk of the two-state solution currently is pure fantasy. If Mr Trump is serious about the Abraham Accords, he needs to tell his friends in Tel Aviv that without Palestinian self-determination, there can be no normalisation. Rumours have also swirled of Pakistan being 'pressurised' to accept the Zionist state. So serious had the chatter become that the foreign minister had to deny speculation that Pakistan was about to normalise ties with Israel. Pakistan's UN representative also recently reiterated that the country was committed to the establishment of the state of Palestine. Meanwhile, the Palestinians have had enough of hollow promises. Unless the promise of a sovereign, contiguous and viable Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital, is realised, the people of Palestine cannot be expected to give up resisting their occupiers, and struggling for the freedom of their homeland. Until Palestine is free, Muslim states must not reward Israel with recognition.

For the children

WORLD Children's Day is upon us, yet countless children are denied even simple rights that should never be in question. This year's call to "listen to children and stand up for their rights" feels painfully apt. Millions of children wake up each day to fear and uncertainty. In conflict zones, children endure bombardment, displacement, trauma and the loss of homes, families, and schools. They are not just witnesses to violence; they are being killed, maimed, and left with life-altering injuries, as seen so starkly in Gaza. In disaster-hit regions, childhoods are being reshaped by water scarcity, disease and hunger. According to the latest *Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates*, in 2024 an estimated 150.2m children under five were stunted, with a further 42.8m wasting. These are the young voices the world fails to hear.

Pakistan has its own failures to contend with. Despite being a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the country remains far from child-friendly. Children here face poverty, hazardous labour, unsafe streets, and inadequate protections against violence and abuse. The justice system remains ill-equipped to handle crimes against children, while abduction, trafficking, and sexual violence surface with alarming regularity. Safe play spaces, quality healthcare, and psychosocial support are limited, especially for girls, street children, and those in rural or marginalised communities. Education, a fundamental right, remains one of Pakistan's glaring failures. An estimated 26m children are out of school. Many drop out because families cannot afford fees, transport, or uniforms; others never enrol due to child labour, early marriage, or the absence of nearby schools. Those who attend often receive poor-quality instruction in overcrowded, under-resourced classrooms. If this country is to honour today's theme "my day, my rights" it must acknowledge how short we have fallen. Pakistan's children, its future, must form the centre of policy. Listening is only the first step; acting on what they tell us is the true test.

BY ALI TAUQEER SHEIKH

Ecosystem of change

Three decades of COP negotiations have transformed climate action.

SCEPTICS argue that the annual climate conferences are elaborate talk shops that produce renewed pledges without commensurate action. This dismissal is fundamentally flawed. It misses the unprecedented transformation unfolding across the global economy.

The Conference of the Parties process under the UNFCCC is the most consequential engine for a paradigm shift in global development. It has created an irreversible ecosystem of change that is accelerating transformation across every major sector. The process has succeeded not through mandate but by embedding innovations in science, economics, ecology, and legal accountability into the global policy bloodstream. COP has effectively rewired the global development trajectory.

UNFCCC's uniqueness: The climate convention that works through annual COPs is uniquely anchored in robust, consensus-driven science from the IPCC, whose *First Assessment Repor*t in 1990 confirmed that human activities were substantially increasing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and causing global warming, directly catalysing the UNFCCC's adoption in 1992. No other environmental convention has such a powerful, independent scientific body constantly updating evidence. The IPCC reports are formally accepted by governments and directly shape ambition for subsequent negotiations, creating a built-in ratchet mechanism through the UNFCCC's five-yearly Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) that compels countries to progressively increase climate ambition backed by latest science.

The UNFCCC has superseded virtually all other global development frameworks. SDG-13 on climate action has become the organising lens through which all other development goals are interpreted. Climate finance rivals traditional development assistance. The NDCs under the Paris Agreement often command more resources than national SDG implementation plans. The COP process has catalysed new fields of intellectual inquiry: climate finance architecture, just transition, climate litigation, net-zero pathways, adaptation economics, climate-triggered displacement, migration, and conflicts.

Climate change poses an existential planetary threat measurable by single, universally understood metrics: GHG emissions and global average temperature rise, with the critical 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold serving as a clear danger line. In contrast, the sister Rio conventions on biodiversity and desertification grapple with multifaceted, localised variables that lack such universal, disruptive metrics. Similarly, climate adaptation and resilience, despite being critical for vulnerable countries like Pakistan, lack standardised global metrics, making it harder to mobilise international finance and political attention compared to mitigation efforts.

Transformations & barriers: The world has not succeeded in limiting global warming to the Paris Agreement's 1.5°C threshold, and this failure carries consequences. Yet to dismiss the past decade as wasted would be to ignore substantial accomplishments. Ten years ago, scientific models projected warming of up to 3.8°C by century's end. Today, that projection has improved to between 2.5 and 2.9°C — still dangerous but representing nearly one degree of warming averted through collective action.

Three decades of COP negotiations have transformed climate action from diplomatic aspiration into structural economic reality, driven mostly by economic imperatives. Solar power costs have plummeted, making renewable energy the cheapest option for new power generation worldwide. E-vehicles have moved from luxury novelty to market reality as one in five cars sold globally is now electric. Clean energy investment has reached unprecedented levels. Financial markets have reoriented, with climate risk now recognised as fiduciary risk. The Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero represents over $130 trillion in assets.

These transformations occurred during the hottest decade on record — a reminder that progress and peril coexist. The world is still failing to meet the 1.5°C benchmark. More troubling is the inability to finance adaptation. While mitigation finance flows relatively freely, especially private sector investments, adaptation finance remains insufficient.

This gap reflects a fundamental asymmetry in the global climate architecture where those least responsible for the crisis bear its heaviest burdens. At COP29, countries acknowledged developing nations require $1.3tr annually by 2035 to manage climate impacts, including $300 billion yearly for adaptation in public finance from developed countries. The commitment falls short of actual need, and where this money will come from remains uncertain. Global warming already inflicts some $1.4tr in annual economic damage worldwide. These costs fall disproportionately on those least responsible yet most vulnerable. The adaptation finance promised represents less than what the world already loses each year, underscoring the inadequacy of international response.

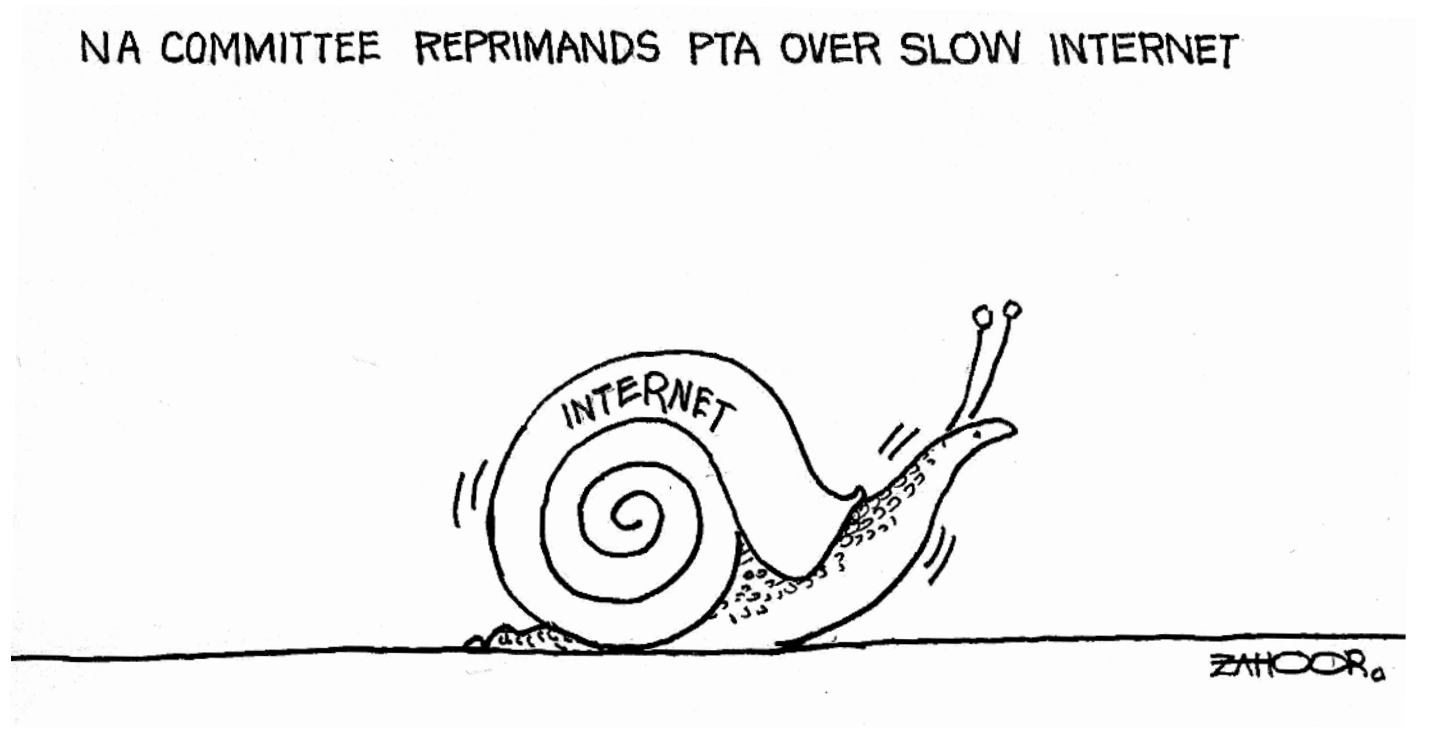
The question is no longer whether transition is possible but whether it can accelerate sufficiently to avert catastrophe. Infrastructure, technology, and economic logic for decarbonisation now exist. What is uncertain is whether national political systems can translate the momentum to adopt their ecosystems of change.

Pakistan's dilemmas: Pakistan's experience reflects both promise and challenge. We have witnessed an explosive rooftop solar revolution while official energy planning paradoxically pursues coal projects that global markets have deemed stranded assets. The farm sector responds, but only to international pressure. Major cities remain absent from global transformative networks like C40. While PSDP has not leapt forward, major infrastructure projects face climate risk screening from international lenders. The SECP has begun to push for sustainability reporting standards, but these market-driven shifts have not translated into a coherent national reform agenda.

Pakistan's adaptation needs are estimated at 10 to 18 times larger than current public finance flows, creating a dangerous situation where crucial domestic reforms are delayed pending promised climate finance that may not arrive. The structural asymmetry compounds this: international funding for mitigation flows as a global public good, while adaptation remains unattended and underfunded.

The UNFCCC has spurred global transformation with undeniable economic benefits. Countries that have embraced this shift report more jobs and stronger growth rates. China's experience is striking: it now earns more from green technologies than the US does from fossil fuels. Yet we must be clear about what COPs can and cannot do. They set direction and global ambition only within the bounds of consensus. National ambition, reform agendas, and delivery mechanisms remain the responsibility of each country. The COP is not an alternative to domestic action. ■

The writer is a climate change and sustainable development expert.



BY KHURRAM HUSAIN

Manias and magic bullets

REMEMBER the great 'water car' mania from the early 2010s? When some fellow managed to convince a large number of senior politicians and TV anchors that he had invented a car that used water as fuel? Remember how far and wide that mania spread, and how the father of Pakistan's nuclear programme himself took to the airwaves to announce that this was some sort of game-changing new invention that held the solution to all our problems?

Remember the '$200 billion in Swiss bank accounts' mania from the mid-2010s? That's when some senior public figures, including Asad Umar, who would go on to serve as Pakistan's finance minister a few years later, proclaimed it from the stage of a dharna. When I wrote an article debunking the figure, I was accused of siding with the billionaires. Years later, after he became finance minister, Umar appeared on the TV show of one of those anchors who had accused me of "siding with the elites" to say that the $200bn figure "is without foundation".

Then there was the offshore oil canard that then prime minister Imran Khan announced minutes after meeting the team of an oil company undertaking drilling, even though he had been told there were no definitive findings to announce yet. In 2014, Nawaz Sharif showed up in Bahawalpur to announce that reserves of gold had been found there that were sufficient to pay our way out of all difficulties. There was the $10bn being siphoned out of Pakistan every year through illicit channels — a figure erroneously sourced to a State Department report (which in fact contained no such estimate). Imran Khan used this as the basis for his claim that Pakistan's economy could be fixed simply by stopping this outflow, which he said was the proceeds of crime and corruption.

In fact, every few years the story repeats itself. Some sort of canard is floated along with claims that this find or development will now solve all our problems and the country will not need to go to its creditors or bilateral partners any longer. We don't have full-blown mania yet, but a low-intensity mania of this sort has been underway around minerals and shale gas in Pakistan, and more recently, there have been early signs of overly optimistic and unrealistic expectations around offshore gas exploration as well.

Something important is trying to speak through these manias that break out regularly every few years. It's an expectation that lurks beneath the surface — that there is one magic bullet, one single development or discovery or one underlying ailment, which if somehow rectified, will send positive change cascading through the entire economy and solve all our problems.

The manias I mentioned are only the tip of the iceberg of this underlying expectation. They represent the most frenetic and furious expression of this hope. But beneath the level of the manias, this same hope expresses itself in subtler ways, and exerts an influence over the minds of important policymakers that gets in the way of any effort to persuade them of the importance of reforms.

> Something important is trying to speak through these manias that break out regularly every few years.

Over the years I have heard important people — civil servants, politicians, army officers — ask me a question that best expresses this underlying hope of a single, magic bullet. 'What is the core problem that holds Pakistan's economy back?' they ask. There are other variations of this question too. 'If you could change one thing, what would it be?' Or 'What is the single most important problem for us to solve?' And so on.

This search for a magic bullet grows out of a perception of society, economy and politics that is very different from the perception that technocratic-minded people — such as economists — bring to bear when evaluating Pakistan's economic challenges, with the aim of producing solutions. The economists' vision begins with some conception of the economy as a whole, as an integrated system that forms the landscape against which economic behaviour plays out. From this conception of the whole, they derive an understanding of how incentives can be structured so as to promote the kind of behaviour the policymaker is striving to achieve, such as promoting investment in export-related industries.

But the magic bullet thinking does not see things the same way. They see the component parts of the system first, and almost always harbour a deep distrust of private capital and technocratic-minded economists. The former they perceive as rapacious predators (not entirely incorrectly). The latter they consider to be 'hitmen', or agents of foreign capital that wants to subjugate Pakistan in a neo-colonial relationship so as to exploit its labour and resources.

There is rarely any dialogue between these two camps. Whenever they do speak, they usually talk past each other. There are not even many landing bays where the two camps can meet. Each sees the other's weaknesses. The economists, or technocrats, can become dogmatic in how they build their construct of the economy as a whole. The other camp often allows its obsession with protecting its own bureaucratic turf to become its sole understanding of what the public interest is. And so the dialogue stalls in a dogma versus turf stand-off.

This is one important reason why a reform conversation has not gathered momentum in Pakistan. The biggest drivers of reform-minded thinking are those connected with creditor capital — the World Bank, IMF, ADB and the donors. Those on the implementing end, particularly civil servants, see their turf under threat from the kinds of changes these bodies propose, and mobilise to secure the funding but stall the change.

Perhaps a bridge can be formed between these two camps. It can begin with a focus on a quick and pointed agenda that focuses its energy on fashioning a greater 'bang for the buck' type of intervention. But the 'big push' kind of reform agendas are never going to find a receptive audience in high places in Pakistan. ■

The writer is a business and economy journalist.

E-Mail: Editorial: editor@dawn.com | Resident Editor (Islamabad): re.isb@dawn.com | Resident Editor (Lahore): re.lhr@dawn.com | Karachi: city@dawn.com | Tel: (021)35670001 | Fax (Edit) (021)35682187 | UAN 111.444.777 (Management) (021)35683188, (Advt): (021) 35683801 | Marketing (Karachi): mktg@dawn.com (021)35613099 | Marketing (Islamabad): mktg.isb@dawn.com (051)2202701-5 | Marketing (Lahore): mktg.lhr@dawn.com (042)111-444-777